

## United States Census Bureau

### Measuring America

#### Poverty: The History of Measure

President Johnson's 1964 declaration of his "War on Poverty" generated a new interest in measuring just how many people were in poverty and how those numbers changed from year to year. The next year the Office of Economic Opportunity adopted a working definition of poverty based on a methodology for counting the poor that had been proposed by Mollie Orshansky, an analyst at the Social Security Administration. In 1967, the Census Bureau published its first set of poverty estimates. Two years later, the Office of Management and Budget issued a memorandum that established the nation's "official" poverty measure and changed the Census Bureau with responsibility for providing annual poverty estimates.

Over the past fifty years, there have been numerous efforts to improve the official poverty measure, including an Interagency Poverty Studies Task Force in the 1970s and a National Academy of Science's expert panel in the 1990s. These efforts triggered research by economists at the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics resulting in the November 2011 publication of poverty estimates using a new "Supplemental Poverty Measure." For the past three years, the Census Bureau has published two sets of national poverty estimates, one using the official method and one using the Supplemental Poverty Measure.

#### Timeline

Nation's "official" poverty measure:

1960 22.2 %

1970 12.6 %

1980 13.0 %

1990 13.5 %

2000 11.3 %

2010 15.1 %

Source: Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplements: 1960 – 2013.

President Lyndon Johnson declares War on Poverty, January 1964.

The office of Economic Opportunity adopts Mollie Orshanskys poverty thresholds as a working definition of poverty for statistical planning, May 1965.

An Interagency Poverty Studies Task Force established under the leadership of the Department of Health and Human Services (then Health, Education, and Welfare), 1974.

Office of Management and Budget issues Statistical Policy Directive No. 14 specifying the definition of poverty for statistical purposes, May 1978.

The Census Bureau holds a conference in Williamsburg, Virginia, on the measurement of noncash benefits, December 1985.

National Academy of Sciences convenes a panel of experts to conduct a study of statistical issues in the measurement of poverty, June 1992.

An Interagency Technical Working Group on Developing a Supplemental Poverty Measures is formed by Commerce Under Secretary Rebecca Blank and Office of Management and Budget Chief Statistician Katherine Wallman and charged with developing a set of initial starting points to permit the U.S. Census Bureau, in cooperation with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, to produce a Supplemental Poverty Measure, December 2009.

The first appearance of national-level poverty population data in a Census publication is in a table in an August 1967 advance report. The first full Census Bureau report on the subject of poverty is issued.

-U.S. Census Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 54, The Extent of Poverty in the United States: 1959 to 1966, Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, May 31, 1968.

The final report of the Poverty Studies Task Force summarizing information collected in 17 technical papers, is submitted to Congress.

-U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, The Measure of Poverty: A Report to Congress as Mandated by the Education Amendments of 1974, Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, April 1976.

The Census Bureau issues its first paper on the valuation of noncash benefits and poverty measures.

-U.S. Bureau of the Census, Technical Paper 50, Alternative Methods for Valuing Selected In-Kind Transfer Benefits and Measuring Their Effect on Poverty (by Timonthy M. Smeeding), Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, March 1982.

The proceedings of the 1985 Williamsburg conference are published by the Census Bureau.

-U.S. Bureau of the Census, Conference on the Measurement of Noncash Benefits, December 12-14, 1985. Proceedings Vol. 1, 1986.

The Panel of Poverty and Family Assistance publishes a report proposing a new approach for measuring poverty.

-Constance F. Citro and Robert T. Michael (editors), Measuring Poverty: A New Approach, Washington, D.C., National Academy Press, 1995.

The Census Bureau issues the first report on experimental poverty measures responding to the NAS report.

- Kathleen Short, Thesia Gartner, David Johnson, and Patricia Doyle, Experimental Poverty Measures, 1990 to 1997, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-205, Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office, June 1999.

Census Bureau publishes reports on the official poverty measures annually. The most recent in September 2013.

-DeNavas-Walt, Carmen, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Jessica C. Smith. Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2012. U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-245. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., September 2013.

The Census Bureau releases its third annual report on the Supplemental Poverty Measure. The Supplemental Poverty Measure provides information on the effects of government programs that are not included in the official poverty measure.

-Short, Kathleen. The Research Supplemental Poverty Measure: 2012, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-247, November 2013.

Source: Gordon M. Fisher, "The Development and History of the Poverty Thresholds, " Social Security Bulletin, Vol. 55, No. 4, Winter 1992, for the history of the official poverty measure presented here. United States Census Bureau

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